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## City of Santa Barbara

# Tips for Providing Better Customer Service To People with Disabilities

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### Page Contents

- Basic Communication Style Tips
  - Basic Communication Content Tips
  - Learning or cognitive disability
  - Wheelchair use
  - Hearing disability
  - Speech disability
  - Sight or Vision disability
  - Don't be nervous
- 

The U.S. Census Bureau 2002 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that people with disabilities make up 18.1% of the U.S. population, and 29% of all families in the U.S. have at least one member who has a disability. Furthermore, any one of us could become disabled at any time. People with disabilities are active members of our community and our workforce, so we all need to be able to communicate effectively with this segment of the population.

The disability etiquette guidelines presented in this section are designed to help City employees avoid uncertainty and uncomfortable situations when meeting, working with, or serving someone with a disability

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### Communication Style Tips

- If you hear the words "this is the California Relay Service" on the phone, don't hang up. This is not a telemarketing call, but a person with a hearing or speech disability trying to contact you. Instead, work with the specially-trained operator on the line who will relay the telephone conversation back and forth.
- A handshake is not a standard greeting for everyone. When in doubt, ASK the person whether he or she would like to shake hands with you. A smile along with a spoken greeting is always appropriate.
- Don't make assumptions about the person or the disability. Let the individual's actions and reactions guide your responses. For example: If someone who is hard-of-hearing needs you to speak more loudly, wait until you are asked before raising your voice.

- Be respectful of the rights of people with disabilities to use accessible parking spaces and assistive services, animals, and devices.
- Always speak directly to the person with a disability, not to a companion, assistant, or sign language interpreter.
- Treat adults as adults. Don't patronize or talk down to people with disabilities.
- If the person does not understand you, try again. You may want to rephrase what you are saying in shorter sentences or use less complex language. Don't become anxious if you have to make repeated attempts at listening or speaking to ensure effective communication.
- If you don't understand what someone is saying, ask them to repeat or rephrase what they just said or offer him or her a pen and paper. Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort. Never pretend to understand what a person is saying.
- Do not assume that a person with a disability needs help. If someone looks in need of help, it is always appropriate to offer polite and patient assistance. However, wait until your offer is accepted and understand that the individual may not need any help and so will decline your offer. If your offer to assist is accepted, listen or ask for instructions before you act.
- Become familiar with the facility's accessibility features, so that you can direct individuals to accessible rest rooms, ramps or elevators, and accessible entrances and exits. Your Department's ADA Liaison can help you identify these features.
- Realize that when people with disabilities ask for accommodations, they are not complaining. Rather, they are asking for what they need in order to participate fully and equally in a particular activity, service or program.
- Respond courteously to all requests for accommodation of a disability. If you cannot provide or authorize an accommodation, promptly and personally relay the request to your Department ADA Liaison, your Department Head, or the City's ADA Coordinator in the City Administrator's Office (Kristy Schmidt, 564-5305).

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### Communication Content Tips

- Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant. Avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability. If you must ask, be sensitive and show respect. Do not probe, if the person declines to discuss it.

- Use "disability" rather than "handicap" to refer to a person's disability. It is okay to say that a person is handicapped by obstacles, such as architectural barriers or the attitudes of ignorant or insensitive people. Never use "cripple/crippled" in any reference to disability.
- When referring to a person's disability, use **"person first"** language. In other words, when necessary, it is better to say "a person with a disability" rather than "a disabled person."
  - Since "disabled" is an adjective, avoid improper constructions such as "disabled group" or "disabled transportation". Instead, build phrases using the word "disability." For example: "group of people with disabilities", "transportation for people with disabilities (or accessible transportation)", "disability activist" or "disability community" are correct and not contradictions to the concept of putting the "person first."
- Avoid referring to people with disabilities as "the disabled, the blind, the epileptics, the retarded, a quadriplegic," etc. Descriptive terms should not be used as nouns. Instead, when referring to someone's disability is essential to the conversation, use descriptive phrases.
  - For example: "person with a disability," "someone who is blind," "Bill who has epilepsy," "my son who has mental retardation," or "Stan needs accessible parking because he has quadriplegia and uses a powered wheelchair."
- Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's disability. Don't say "suffers from," "a victim of," or "afflicted with." Don't refer to people with disabilities as "patients" unless they are receiving treatment in a medical facility. Never say "invalid." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities would rather have.
- Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman. This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.
- Don't use "normal" to describe people who don't have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "typical," if necessary to make comparisons.
- Never say "wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair." People who use mobility or adaptive equipment are, if anything, afforded freedom and access that otherwise would be denied them.
- It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along."

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### **When meeting a person with a disability that affects learning, intelligence, or brain function:**

1. Keep your communication simple. Rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
2. Stay focused on the person as he or she responds to you.
3. Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.

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### **When you are with a person who uses a wheelchair:**

1. Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space.
2. Try to put yourself at eye level when talking with someone in a wheelchair. Sit or kneel in front of the person.
3. Rearrange furniture or objects to accommodate a wheelchair before the person arrives.
4. Offer to tell where accessible rest rooms, telephones, and water fountains are located.
5. When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles (curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.)

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### **Talking with a person with a hearing disability or who uses a hearing aid:**

1. Let the person take the lead in establishing the communication mode, such as lip-reading, sign language, or writing notes.
2. Talk directly to the person, even when a sign language interpreter is present.
3. If the person lip-reads, face him or her directly, speak clearly and with a moderate pace.
4. With some people, it may help to simplify your sentences and use more facial expressions and body language.

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### **When meeting a person with a disability that affects speech:**

1. Pay attention, be patient, and wait for the person to complete a word or thought. Do not finish it for the person.
2. Ask the person to repeat what is said, if you do not understand. Tell the person what you heard and see if it is close to what he or she is saying.
3. Be prepared for various devices or techniques used to enhance or augment speech. Don't be afraid to communicate with someone who uses an alphabet board or a computer with synthesized speech.

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## Interacting with a person with a disability that affects sight or vision:

1. When greeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
2. Do not leave the person without excusing yourself first.
3. When asked to guide someone with a sight disability, never push or pull the person. Allow him or her to take your arm, then walk slightly ahead. Point out doors, stairs, or curbs, as you approach them.
4. As you enter a room with the person, describe the layout and location of furniture, etc.
5. Be specific when describing the location of objects. (Example: "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock.")
6. Do not pet or distract a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is working. It is not a pet.

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## Don't be nervous

Relax. Anyone can make mistakes, so just do your best. Offer an apology if you forget some courtesy, and ask for help if you need it.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact:

**Kristy Schmidt, ADA Compliance Officer**  
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